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Indie Developers and the Queer Content Renaissance in Video Games, 2013-2017

By

Shane Michael Hansaruk

A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of Communication, Media and Film
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
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Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2022

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Indie Developers and the Queer Content Renaissance in Video Games, 2013-2017

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January 13th, 2022

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ABSTRACT

Queer content in video games has existed since the 1970s, but as time and technology have progressed, so too have the potential for queer content in video games. During the mid-2010's, a sudden increase in the number of games with queer content began, lasting between the years 2013 and 2017. This research project examines this period in great detail to determine the cause of this drastic increase. Through examining queer games literature, two queer games databases, and two select titles from this period, I determine that independent, or "indie" developers, have a substantial impact on the increase of queer games content during this time. I conduct a numerical count of two queer games databases to determine the number of both independent and mainstream games released in these years, as well as a qualitative content analysis on a mainstream title, *Fallout 4*, and an indie title, *Curtain*, to determine how each sector incorporates queer content in their games.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this major research paper to several people. Firstly, I would like to dedicate this to my family: my mother Kellie, my father Frank, my sister Taylor, and my dog Dexter. Without their support and encouragement, I would not have been able to keep going. I love you all.

I would also like to dedicate this to my girlfriend, Nonika. She has been so supportive throughout this entire process, has helped me brainstorm ideas, and has always been there to talk when things got rough. Thank you for everything, you have no idea how much you mean to me.

As well, I want to dedicate this to my committee; my advisor, Dr. Jyotika Viridi, and my department reader, Professor Michael Stasko. Both of their guidance and input have been invaluable to this process, and if it were not for their experience and wisdom grounding my ideas, I would not have gotten this done. I could not have done this without you.

Lastly, I want to dedicate this to my late Golden Retriever, Morgan, who sadly passed away during the writing of this project. I miss you so much and I hope you are resting well. Thank you for being the best dog ever.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s, even before I was four years old, I began playing video games and through them I recall bonding with both my parents and sister. I moved onto newer games as the years progressed and this association led to my love for the video game art form, one that has grown stronger over time. I decided to conduct my research in the field of video games because I have extensive experience with and passion for video games. As the years passed and as more games came out, I noticed the number of games featuring queer characters, themes and content was visibly growing, even though this group has historically been underrepresented in different media. This motivated me to focus on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in video games. While exploring the literature on queer games, I came across a study by Alanya Cole, Adrienne Shaw and Jessica Zammit that discusses diversity around gender, race, and sexuality in video games from 2013-2015. One part of this study immediately caught my eye. The authors, in passing, mention noticing a substantial increase in the number of video games with queer content released during these years. This inspired me to look into the phenomenon and upon further investigation, I discovered that the queer content increase in video games did indeed begin in 2013, but extended beyond 2015, continuing all the way to 2017. This finding sharpened my focus and steered my research paper on LGBTQ+ content in video games. I decided to examine what accounts for the exponential increase in games with LGBTQ+ content that seemed quite sudden in the second decade of the new millennium.

As a gamer throughout my life, playing video games since the late 1990s, initially the progression of gay inclusion in the early 2010s seemed rather natural and steady to me. However, seeing a sudden spike between 2013 and 2017 was startling. I began wondering what

factors led to this increase over previous years. I know the video game industry is constantly changing and evolving, and any number of factors could contribute to this. Further investigation on my part revealed a clear indicator: independent developers were the industry's catalyst. The list of games with queer content from this period shows that most of them are created by independent game-makers and compared to larger developers, their games have many more intricate nuances in LGBTQ+ content than those of the AAA games industry.

I decided to examine the ways in which independent developers (“indies”) incorporated LGBTQ+ themes and content into their games, scrutinize their contribution to the exponential increase in games with this type of content, and compare them to the mainstream AAA video game developer's attempts. My research question in this paper is: how has the independent gaming industry, more specifically the queer indie scene, contributed to the drastic increase in LGBTQ+ content in video games from the years 2013-2017? My aim is to uncover the ways in which independent game developers have contributed to the LGBTQ+ landscape of video games and the impact these developers and their games have had on the drastic increase in this type of content between the years 2013 and 2017.

History of Queer Struggles and Popular Culture

The grave injustice against the LGBTQ+ community throughout history, and even in contemporary times, reveals the deep prejudice and sheer hatred that LGBTQ+ persons suffer. In the Stonewall riots that took place in the summer of 1969 in Greenwich Village, police infamously raided a small gay bar at the Stonewall Inn on the morning of June 28th, 1969, leading to many innocent gay bargoers being wrongfully arrested and assaulted (Carter, 2004, p. 141). In retaliation, a series of protests and riots followed in the New York City area over the

course of that week to fight for gay rights (Carter, 2004, p. 156). This event is widely considered the first mobilization for LGBTQ+ rights in the United States, one that helped shape the gay liberation movement throughout the 1970s (D'Emilio, 2004, p. 7).

In the 1980s, the spread of AIDS only helped fuel the discrimination and hate directed at members of the LGBTQ+ community. Human Immunodeficiency Virus infection and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) became a major issue in the 1980s, as the deadly disease was first reported in the gay paper *New York Native*, chronicling the origins of the virus in the US (Cloutier, 2020, para. 14). The first reported cases of AIDS were in gay men, and when a large number of gay men were diagnosed with the disease, it fueled the common misconception that AIDS could only be contracted and spread by gay men. This was factually inaccurate, but it enabled discrimination and public antipathy towards the LGBTQ+ community (Schaefer, 2020, para. 10). In 1998, one incident in the series of violent hate crimes committed against queer persons caught international attention. Matthew Shepard, a college student at the University of Wyoming, became the subject of the most well-known case of hate crimes towards gay persons. On the night of October 6th, 1998, Shepard was confronted by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, who proceeded to assault, rob, and torture him before leaving him to die tied to a barbwire fence in Laramie, Wyoming (Cullen, 2011, para. 4). He was later taken to the trauma ward at Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he remained in a coma for six days before passing away on October 12th (CNN, 1998). Many were outraged by the atrocity of the murder and Shepard emblemized the blatant hostility gay persons suffer. The incident intensified the support for LGBTQ+ rights and liberation, including the formation of The Matthew Shepard Foundation in December 1998, and the passing of The Matthew Shepard Act in October 2009. Together these have worked toward the rights of the LGBTQ+ community by

enforcing laws against gender/sexuality driven hate crimes and funding several programs for LGBTQ+ inclusion (Jackson, 2009, para. 4).

This history of discrimination towards the LGBTQ+ community intersects with the timeline of legalizing gay marriage. While some gay couples committed themselves to marriage, most countries did not acknowledge or outright banned same-sex marriage throughout the 1970s and 80s. However, as time progressed, places around the world began to accept gay marriage, with the Netherlands being the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage in April 2001 (Reuters, 2000, para. 4). While some rightfully argue that it took much too long to properly legalize same-sex marriage, the stance taken by the Netherlands started a domino effect, and more places around the world began to write same-sex marriage into law.

The LGBTQ+ community has had a tumultuous history, with numerous tragic instances of hate and violent animus. However, over time, the public perception of gay persons began to change. The growing acceptance and tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community was achieved through a steady struggle for change led by gay advocacy organizations and laws that demanded equality for not only gay persons, but also strived for non-binary and transgender rights. This shift in social attitudes is now reflected in much of our media, which since the late 1990s has played its own part in the LGBTQ+ inclusion that we are witnessing. In popular culture many television shows, movies and comics have incorporated notable gay characters, such as, Dumbledore from the *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011), Hikaru Sulu in the modern *Star Trek* films (2009-2016), and Ramona Flowers in the *Scott Pilgrim* comics (2010).

This shifting attitude, a move away from heteronormative dominance, also holds true for video games. Originally created as a source of fun and entertainment, they have become vehicles

for social inclusivity, a means to connect with marginalized groups through interactivity. Video games have evolved into experiences, becoming increasingly focused on engaging narratives, cinematic presentations, and deeper characterization, which has allowed for meaningful identification amongst diverse communities. With greater focus on diversity came a steady increase in the types of representation in games; over the years diverse groups and communities have been given greater representation in games, including, but not limited to, people of different genders, races, and sexualities. Among these, the group who has received the most substantial representation in modern gaming is the LGBTQ+ community.

The number of gay characters or narratives revolving around homosexuality in games has steadily increased over the last decade, with games like the *Mass Effect* (2007-present) series and *Life is Strange* (2015) being two of the most famously welcomed examples of LGBTQ+ game representation. However, while queer content and representation in video games became more abundant by the 2010s, other mediums such as television had hit this trend much earlier. Ellen DeGeneres' famous reveal happened in April 1997, both in that month's issue of *Time Magazine* as well as in her television sitcom *Ellen* (Kettler, 2020, para. 1). *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, one of the most popular gay reality television series, premiered in 2003 and ran until 2007, with a Netflix reboot premiering in 2018 and still running to this day (Jackson, 2021, para. 2). In film, titles such as *Monster* (2003), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Milk* (2008) all featured gay characters, while independent gay films flourished in the early 1990s with the emergence of the "New Queer Cinema" (Ruby Rich, 2017, para. 2). Compared to this, the abundance of queer content in video games seems rather late, as watershed titles like the previously mentioned *Mass Effect* (2007-present) series, *Life is Strange* (2015), and others like *Dragon Age* (2009) released in the late 2000s, and further into the 2010s. Despite this late start, as more games began to

include diversified content and themes, more diverse developers became known in the industry. The sheer quantity of LGBTQ+ content in video games grew, allowing a sort of Renaissance to take shape, one heralded by many queer independent game makers who began incorporating more queer themes and narratives into the games they have created. Through the interactivity of video games, this abundance of queer content allows for people within the queer community to connect more with the video game art form and allows more people overall to experience and enjoy playing video games.

In the following sections, I turn to examining the literature around the queer indie scene that frames the design philosophy on queer game development and how their inclusion of LGBTQ+ content differs from the AAA industry. I will then describe how I use content analysis, the method to examine ways in which each sphere of the gaming industry incorporates queer content into their games. I use this method in two different ways: first, based on data I extracted from the Represent Me database, I determined the number of games featuring queer content from this period. Sifting through this vast database, I discerned how many video games are designated as indie or mainstream. I follow this up with determining the percentage of LGBTQ+ content games within each, the indie and mainstream releases during this period. This is to determine the proportion of games with queer content released within each, the indie and mainstream industries. Second, I conducted a qualitative content analysis on two key titles released in the 2013 to 2017 period. One is representative of a mainstream AAA game titled *Fallout 4* (2015), and the other is an indie game, *Curtain* (2014). *Fallout 4* (2015) was chosen due to its popularity, accolades, and its lineage in the gaming industry. The *Fallout* (1997-present) series is one of the most well-known franchises in gaming, with many previous entries offering queer content; thus, *Fallout 4* (2015) was chosen partly due to the series' reputation in the gaming industry. *Curtain*

(2014), on the other hand, was chosen due to its subject matter, creator, and exposé of queer abuse and manipulation. *Curtain* (2014) is one of the only games I have seen offer an insider's account on queer marginalization based on the creator's experiences with abuse and it reveals its impact on a person's psyche. I closely analyze the queer content in each game and compare them to see how each sector of the video game industry, mainstream and indie, handles the inclusion of queer content.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Video games have been including LGBTQ+ content since 1976 with the title *Bunnies and Burrows*, one of the first role-playing games, or RPGs (LGBTQ Video Game Archive). In the new millennium, queer game scholars have extensively researched the significance of queer themes in video games and how these represent this marginalized group. However, one area has gone relatively unnoticed: a massive increase in the amount of LGBTQ+ content in games released from the years 2013-2017. My research project examines this period to determine the major factors that led to this increase. I examine the literature on queer game studies and the incorporation of LGBTQ+ content in games to draw a clearer picture of how this increase came to be.

Queer Studies Resources

Before turning to the literature on queer themes in video games, a brief note about the usefulness of concepts in queer studies that have shaped my perspective and approach. Queer theory is a theoretical approach that examines the norms and values of sexualities and gender identities outside heteronormativity that challenge heteronormative structures. Queer theory can be adapted to the object one analyzes. For instance, in Patrick Dilley's (1999) description, queer

theory “supposes a position [...] outside the margins of ‘normality’ [...] It represents [...] how and why the experiences of non-heterosexual people are studied” (p. 459). According to this description, queer theory offers a critical understanding of how queer identities are subordinated within our broader social system’s dominant heteronormative values. Since queer theory is a critical lens focusing on heteronormativity and the marginalization of queerness, it can aid in examining queer content in texts and media such as video games, to view how queerness is depicted and operates within these texts. It points to a greater sociopolitical understanding of queerness in our world. According to Dilley (1999), queer theory “might offer the most qualitative of methodologies for collecting and analyzing data [...] queer theory opens more ‘texts’ for study, and more bodies of knowledge to compile, compare, and evaluate” (p. 461). Queer games provide empirical knowledge about representations of queerness and queer theory enables a critical scrutiny of misconceptions about queerness.

Using queer theory to analyze video game content can also highlight the force of heterosexual normativity that can only be eroded by greater social inclusivity. For instance, Boni Wozolek in her article *Implications of Queer Theory for Qualitative Research* (2019), discusses how using queer theory in qualitative research methods can “serve as a powerful tool with which to shift historical and contemporary understandings in schools and communities” (p. 2). Since heterosexuality and cisgender identities are still considered the norm in most communities, Wozolek (2019) argues that queer theory’s critical perspective and queer knowledge can be used to replace dominant heteronormativity with equity and inclusion for more vulnerable LGBTQ+ members of society (p. 2).

By scrutinizing queer elements in primary sources such as video games, queer theory provides valuable tools to advocate an agenda of equality for the non-heteronormative. Queer

theory's versatility helped me when reviewing queer games. It gave me a greater understanding of recurring themes, such as familial rejection, abuse, anxiety, victimization, ridicule, hostility, and educating people unfamiliar with these issues. It also gave me an appreciation for specific power structures in the gaming industry that drove the substantial increase in queer game content. More queerly driven indie developers have emerged in the last decade enabled by openly available resources to create games. This shift is something queer theory has documented over the years; the evolution of the gaming industry, one that houses more queer developers and offers public development tools for them, fits with queer theory's examination of "liberal ideas for equality, building on feminist and other liberatory political movements, that pursued questions of identity categories and how power is distributed among and between them" (Watson, 2005, p. 69). More diverse developers and tools for game making reveal how queer theory strives for structures of inclusivity in many sectors, including the gaming industry, and shifts that account for the substantial increase in queer game content.

Above all else, queer theory helps us understand how heteronormativity is the dominant power structure in our society. Queer theory explores the spaces in which heteronormativity is firmly grounded. For instance, in the private realm, with parents and families' negative reactions to their children or siblings coming out as gay; public ridicule, ostracization, hostility and violence against trans people; or religious venom against sanctifying gay marriage. It is this grounded, realistic examination of the terrain in which heteronormativity operates the way it does, and is accepted, that makes queer theory crucial to my understanding of queer game literature and the games I analyze. It is ultimately "queer theory's defining goal of destabilizing all norms" that makes it important to me and my study (Ahn et. al., 2014, p. 120) Queer theory makes heteronormativity in *Fallout 4* (2015) very apparent. Equally, it aids in exploring the

challenges homosexuals face in games like *Curtain* (2014) that stand for inclusivity, equality, diversity--and exposing the double victimization LGBTQ+ members' experience.

The Rise of Indies

The LGBTQ+ literature on content in games and LGBTQ+ game studies is vast and varied, but literature focusing on the significant increase of LGBTQ+ content in video games from 2013 to 2017 is extremely scarce. However, the study mentioned earlier, *Representations of Queer Identity in Games from 2013-2015*, by Alayna Cole, Adrienne Shaw, and Jessica Zammit, presented at the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Conference in 2017, sheds light on this. As stated, the study focuses primarily on diverse representation in video games, and briefly mentions a period during 2013 to 2015 when the number of games featuring queer content skyrocketed. They speculate this sharp increase of game releases with LGBTQ+ content could be the rise of both independent game developers and more widespread access to game development tools (Alayna et. al., 2017, p. 3). I scrutinize this period more closely to examine what motivates the sudden expansion of LGBTQ+ game content, its invaluable influence and contribution to the field of queer game studies.

There are no specific studies on the general increase in LGBTQ+ game content; rather, the literature is focused on various aspects of the gaming industry which could have catalyzed this increase. Globally, academics and scholars have studied LGBTQ+ content in video games and explored how this content can push the medium towards a greater inclusionary space for this community. One recurring theme within much of the literature on LGBTQ+ video games is the rise of the independent gaming scene. In the realm of video games, much like with other media such as film or television, there is a group of independent game makers who create video games

outside the jurisdiction of the standard AAA industry. These developers have come to be regarded as visionaries within the video game industry, creating uniquely original games that provide both creative new game mechanics and meaningful representation.

There has been an increase in the number of games dealing with LGBTQ+ related topics, such as gender and sexuality, which are being created by LGBTQ+ independent developers. Alexander Higgins discusses the astronomical increase in LGBTQ+ content in video games in *Cuties Killing Video Games: Gender Politics and Performance in Indie Game Developer Subculture* (2015). Pointing to the independent gaming scene as potentially “a more egalitarian model for game production and consumption” – that is, one that encompasses more diverse people and creates games and game stories based around greater inclusion of all persons (Higgins, 2015, p. 53), his analysis of the independent gaming scene draws attention to the rise of the “queer renaissance” in the indie gaming scene (Higgins, 2015, p. 57). This combined with the rise of readily available developer software like Twine (Higgins, 2015, p. 58) have meant that while mainstream developers will ultimately continue to be the driving force for shaping how games are made, the increase in independent developers, their methods and technology will push an agenda for inclusion, more equitable gender politics and diverse sexual identities in the gaming industry (Higgins, 2015, p. 202).

Many queer game studies researchers have brought attention to the work being done by independent game developers, applauding their games for incorporating unique gameplay/narrative mechanics and combining them with LGBTQ+ elements to create thought-provoking queer narratives. Ewan W. Lauteria discusses one such example in his article *Procedurally and Fictively Relevant* (2011). Lauteria examines the game *A Closed World* (2011) as a case study. The game is an interesting case, as it utilizes its mechanics to flesh out a

narrative “of lived moments confronting homophobia [...] the game [is] premised on rooting its fictive world and procedural gameplay mechanics on queer lived experiences” (Lauteria, 2011, p. 2). Games such as *A Closed World*, Lauteria argues, are prime examples of the phenomenal work that indie developers are doing with LGBTQ+ content and representation in games (p. 10). In this instance, we see a game that not only has queer themes at the core of its narrative but takes those themes and phases them into its procedurally generated game mechanics to create a wholly queer experience, one that can speak to many queer gamers suffering from discrimination.

This growing relevance and importance of the independent gaming scene in queer game studies is further made apparent through the work of Adrienne Shaw, arguably one of the biggest queer game scholars. Shaw and partner Elizaveta Friesem in their article *Where is the Queerness in Games?* (2016) discuss the kind of queer content in games since the early 1970s. In this study, they discuss the way that commercial game development has handled “causes” in a manner more problematic or harmful, pointing to instances of poor queer content and representation (p. 3878). The authors specifically mention the independent gaming scene as a more diverse and helpful alternative to the AAA mainstream industry, stating that “independent game development is identified as a key site for creating new forms of LGBTQ representation” (p. 3878). An indie queer movement is coming, one that can bring forth more interesting queer content in video games that is worth examining (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3886). These studies give credibility to the idea that the independent gaming scene is the main reason for the massive increase in this type of content in games.

In Felan Parker’s short paper titled *Indie Game Studies Year Eleven* (2013), he discusses the general history of the independent gaming industry, from its inception to the present, and

mentions the importance of the queer indie scene as “an area of increasing interest for indie game studies” (Parker, 2017, p. 7). However, Parker (2013) goes one step further and mentions that much of the writing on queer indie gaming comes from the developers themselves, almost acting as an autobiographical recording of their time and experiences developing indie games in a queer space (p 7). What Parker is discussing here is something brought up in many of the studies and articles based around queer game studies, which is the direct involvement from independent developers in shaping the literature in this field. Scholars like Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg are significant contributors to queer game studies literature, which comprises of in-depth interviews with independent developers, queer game makers, and queer players. Studies and research like this, closely examining people working in this field, are crucial to our understanding of how this indie scene has helped shape a queer space for games to grow, and the overall rise in LGBTQ+ content in video games.

Documenting the history of queer developers is significant to the literature in the field, as seen in Bonnie Ruberg’s book *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* (2020). This book valiantly reveals the queer personalities behind the games, showing how each developer incorporates their queer experiences into their titles. Ruberg (2020) states that these games make a commitment to sharing queer perspectives and are as varied as the individuals who make them (p. 3). This book also shares another perspective: indie games with queer representation hitting mainstream popularity, with games such as, Game Grump’s *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017), Toby Fox’s *Undertale* (2015), Christine Love’s *Ladykiller in a Bind* (2016), and Llaura McGee’s *Curtain* (2014) (p.7-10). All these represent the queer game’s avant-garde, a Renaissance of independent games featuring queer representation and content. These examples are particularly

important, as they have reached widespread critical and commercial success across the entire gaming industry and were all released within the period I examine in this study.

The queer game's avant-garde is an important event to document, as it represents a turning point where queer developers and their games started to gain the recognition they rightfully deserved. Queer developers showcased the legitimacy of their work, through their potential to directly benefit marginalized creators when they received general exposure, access to resources, and support from reputable institutions (Ruberg, 2020, p. 16). The queer game's avant-garde also reveals a series of themes present within queer developed titles that add to the diversity of queer indie games. Some of these themes include exploring queerness beyond representation, examining the darker sides of queer identity, basing narratives in raw emotion, questioning queer empathy, and deconstructing queer politics (Ruberg, 2020, pp. 19-21). This movement, and the games it devised, have enormous potential as pointed to in the queer game studies literature. Queer indie games are shaping the industry and the LGBTQ+ content in video games grew exponentially from 2013-2017, as indicated in key avant-garde titles released in this period.

But What About the Mainstream?

The literature I have reviewed thus far is not meant to imply that the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in games is limited to the indies. The mainstream, or AAA, industry has also made efforts towards including LGBTQ+ content in larger, big budget games. Many developers like BioWare, Bethesda and CD Projekt Red have continuously attempted to incorporate LGBTQ+ content and representation in their games over the years, to varying degrees of success. While some AAA developers have received positive reception from the gaming industry for the

type of LGBTQ+ content they incorporate in their games, others have not been so lucky, with many AAA games being criticized for superficial inclusion rather than providing nuanced portrayals that enhance the player experience.

A prime example of a AAA gaming property that has had controversial LGBTQ+ content and representation is EA's *The Sims* (2000). *The Sims* became a notable title within the industry, not just because of its intricate life simulator mechanics, but because it was one of the first games released on PC in 2000 and later home consoles in 2003, that included LGBTQ+ content; players can form same-sex relationships, marry Sims of the same sex, engage in same-sex sexual encounters (or "Woo Hoo" in Sims terms), and adopt a child as a same-sex couple (Consalvo, 2003, p. 24). For a game from the early 2000s, *The Sims* inclusion of LGBTQ+ content is very impressive and positive. However, with *The Sims 3* in the early 2010s, changes were made to the system that were a disappointing step backwards to how previous games handled this. Sims in *The Sims 3* will not engage in autonomous same-sex relationships without input from the player, meaning that if the player does not create at least one same-sex couple, the entire neighbourhood will be barred from having same-sex couples (Lauteria, 2011, pp.4-5). This is a baffling design decision for a series that was regarded as a catalyst for meaningful LGBTQ+ representation in video games from its inception. In 1996, a scandal occurred around *SimCopter*'s release. It was discovered that on certain dates, "swarms of 'himbo's' would appear on tops of buildings, hugging and kissing each other (with loud sound effects)" (Keeley, 2017, para. 7). This blatant showcase of homosexuality caused the content programmer Jacques Servin to be fired from developer Maxis, and the content was removed from all subsequent versions of the game. Servin revealed that he included the content "due to the intolerable working conditions at Maxis" (Keeley, 2017, para. 8).

These are only a couple examples of how the AAA industry has taken steps forward—as well as backward—in the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content. A recurring theme in literature discussing LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream games points out that while the extent of LGBTQ+ representation has been steadily increasing over the years, it is still rather low (Haines, 2019, p. 24). Many instances of queerness found within AAA games, such as *Fallout*, *Fable* and *Call of Duty*, are hidden behind background information, in many cases never becoming relevant to the game’s narrative or mechanics (Haines, 2019, p. 42). In the case of games such as *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), queer content has been relegated to perks that give the player character certain bonuses for making their character queer (Rutherford, 2011). These perks also give the player a damage boost against members of the same sex, as well as unlock queer dialogue options to receive bonuses and advantages. This has many underlying issues, as it shows that in this game’s universe, “sexuality is instrumental and commodified” (Rutherford, 2011), and portrays queer people as violent manipulators.

Dragon Age is yet another example of a AAA game series examined in queer games literature that problematically incorporates LGBTQ+ content. In *Dragon Age 2* (2011), players are allowed to engage in numerous same-sex relationships, regardless of the gender the player picks for their character at the start of the game; however, this is directly contrasted with the main city the game takes place in, Kirkwall. Kirkwall is a city that is highly racist and xenophobic, but for whatever reason, is completely sexually free, allowing anyone of any sexual orientation to romance whoever they want (Lauteria, 2011, p. 7). This is a bafflingly unrealistic depiction of discrimination, and removing heterosexism from the society of *Dragon Age 2* (2011) not only deprives the game of any meaningful commentary on queer politics, but also robs queer players of opportunities to connect with the queer struggles of their player character.

In all the *Dragon Age* games, as well as many AAA games in general, the agency of the player is what creates the queer content. Many games make LGBTQ+ content optional, meaning that if the player does not search for it or engage with it, queerness just does not exist in the game (Devlin & Holohan, 2016, p. 7). This notion that queer content should be hidden and only discovered by those actively seeking it out is a problem that many games struggle with, but it is most persistent within AAA games.

This is further perpetuated by AAA developer attitudes towards sexuality in games. The discrepancy between players and developers is apparent in the case of BioWare and their game *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011). In her article *No homosexuals in Star Wars?* (2015), Megan Condis discusses the ways in which developers issue corporate statements after controversies to explain what the game makers believe players genuinely want from their games (p. 199). She points to the example of a situation in 2009 where BioWare, the developers of *SW:TOR* (2011), would ban words such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ from the game’s online forums (Condis, 2015, p. 202). The reason was never explicitly stated, but it was at first assumed that the developers wanted to crack down on derogatory or hateful use of the term; however, it turned out that BioWare banned the terms because they did not want to bring sexual politics into discussion of their game (Condis, 2015, p. 199). This decision was seen as distinctly anti-queer, as it gave the toxic heteronormative members more power to silence the marginalized LGBTQ+ community. BioWare later reversed their decision, though many saw this as a deliberate business strategy to capitalize on the queer market (Condis, 2015, p. 200).

This is not the first instance of a large AAA company within the industry articulating such policies. In a similar vein, companies such as Blizzard Entertainment and Microsoft have banned words on their game forums in the past, going as far as banning members who were open

about their sexuality because it was “for their own good” (Condis, 2015, p. 202). The way mainstream gaming companies handle LGBTQ+ content in their games is drastically different from that of independent developers. While indie game makers are open and transparent with their audience and incorporate queerness into their narratives and game mechanics in meaningful, nuanced ways, mainstream studios offer the bare minimum. They make much of their LGBTQ+ content hidden or add it as a token gesture that is superficial, and in some instances their representations and public forum policies are problematic to the LGBTQ+ community. Their policies and public image conform with a trend that many companies follow—to include queer content in the barest sense, while simultaneously capitalizing on a potentially expanding market. The literature on mainstream gaming’s inclusion of LGBTQ+ further solidifies the theory that independent developers could be the reason this content grew rapidly between 2013-2017, as we have seen that indie game makers are far more well versed and experienced with building this type of content in creative, meaningful, and engaging ways.

The Myth of Indie Freedom

The narrative in this literature shows queer indie game-making has a bright future for the gaming industry. However, there exists a myth about queer indie game-making that these games are “easy” to make and that they can be made on the cheap. It is critical to acknowledge the sheer amount of labour that indie game-makers put into their work, work that is ultimately undervalued and exploited by the AAA industry (Ruberg, 2019, p. 779). The truth of the matter is that the work produced by queer indies is far from easy, as Bonnie Ruberg exposes in her article *The Precarious Labour of Queer Indie Game-making* (2019). Ruberg (2019) analyzes the inner machinations of the queer indie game scene, showing how indie game-makers and their labour are precarious and exploited by other parts of the industry. Queer indie game development is

rarely ever compensated properly, with many queer developers openly discussing their struggles with making ends meet and, in many cases, their struggles with homelessness (Ruberg, 2019, p. 780). Much of the value of queer indie game-making is extracted by larger developers, wishing to take inspiration from these smaller, more creatively charged projects. This leads to larger profits for the more mainstream game developers, as they steal concepts and mechanics directly from the works of small queer teams. It reinforces the harsh truth that much of queer indie game-making is both precarious and exploited (Ruberg, 2019, p. 780).

What is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the myth of queer indie freedom is the reality that they are constantly exploited by larger companies wishing to profit off their ideas, while individual LGBTQ+ members still cope with ridicule and discrimination. Queer indie games have added value to the industry, lending them the credibility of being diverse, while enabling larger, more privileged developers to exploit their work and claim that they were “inspired” by the LGBTQ+ community (Ruberg, 2019, p. 785). This exploitation lowers the morale of queer indie developers, as their work becomes yet another tool in the capitalist system of the AAA gaming industry. What affects them even more, however, is the vitriol they face daily. Queer indie developers experience homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination simply for belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, but this discrimination extends to the games they make as well. Queer indie developers are constantly “navigating vitriol in response to their games or managing the emotional labor of working in an industry that feels [...] like a ‘hostile environment’” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 783).

Ruberg’s essay recontextualizes every other piece of queer game literature because it reveals the dark and insidious side of making games as a queer person. Many make false assumptions that working as an indie developer means that you are “free” from the reach of the

larger games industry. Many feel that indie games would be “cheaper to produce” simply because they are not as graphically demanding as AAA titles. This could not be further from the truth; queer indie developers spend years crafting their work, sacrificing time, energy, emotional stability, and financial security to bring their visions to life. Ruberg makes it clear that whether or not queer indie developers are responsible for the boom of LGBTQ+ game content, further research in this field should bring more attention to the numerous challenges that these creative individuals face in the industry.

The literature overall points to the increase in LGBTQ+ game content from 2013-2015. Through further examination, I have determined this increase continues until 2017. I have highlighted the role of independent developers, mainly queer developers, in a queer games Renaissance, bursting with creative, thought provoking and innovative games that challenge the industry, and were released between 2013-2017. Moreover, the way LGBTQ+ content has been incorporated in mainstream AAA games pales by comparison, offering a much less nuanced and detailed depiction of LGBTQ+ themes and struggles. Undoubtedly, queer indie developers are the main contributors for the substantial queer game content increase. However, the specific period of 2013-2017 needs to be examined in greater detail. I intend to closely compare the indie and mainstream industries rather than treat them separately, an approach that dominates the literature on LGBTQ+ games.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

I use content analysis as my research method, which involves examining and analyzing digital texts, visuals and audio used in video games. Uwe Flick et. al. in the book *A Companion to Qualitative Research* (2004) describe content analysis as “the systematic examination of

communicative material [...] This does not have to consist exclusively of texts: musical, pictorial plastic or other similar materials may also be treated” (p. 266). It gives a baseline understanding of what content analysis can be used for, and this extends to things like video games as well. Terry Bullen and Mike Katchabaw (2006) discuss how content analysis can be used to examine video games. They state that even though it can have its limitations, content analysis is “invaluable in providing a quantitative assessment of games to complement more qualitative analysis” (Bullen & Katchabaw, 2006, p. 1), which makes it “an important tool to scholars of games studies and other media issues” (Bullen & Katchabaw, 2006, p. 1).

My research question’s objective is to examine video games in relation to a social issue. I will use content analysis to examine two video games, one mainstream and one independent, and examine each of these for their different in-game systems, content, and mechanics. I will then assess which of these developers are better suited to creating LGBTQ+ content in games and which sector contributed more to the 2013-2017 dramatic increase of queer game content. To a limited extent, I also utilize data extraction in that I tabulate numerical data from both The LGBTQ Video Game Archive and Represent Me, invaluable databases to show the numerical growth of this phenomenon.

Data Tabulated from Queer Games Databases

The two online databases, The LGBTQ Video Game Archive and Represent Me, are both not-for-profit, independent organizations whose goal is to create a retrospective history and timeline of games with queer content. After extensive searching online, I have concluded that these are without question the only databases curating and chronicling queer content in video games. These databases were created by some of the leading names in queer game studies,

including Alanya Cole, Adrienne Shaw and Jessica Zammit. Both the LGBTQ Video Game Archive and Represent Me pride themselves on being non-profit organizations that improve diverse representation in video games, with the latter contributing all proceeds from merchandise towards free public resources that help underrepresented creators get their voice heard in the industry (Represent Me). The intuitive tools, clean and organized presentation, and consistent updates handled by renowned names in queer games studies makes them the best places to find information on queer game content. To clarify, while I examine both databases for this study, the bulk of the findings are based on the Represent Me database, as the site offered detailed spreadsheet categorization tools, making it a user-friendly resource. However, The LGBTQ Video Game Archive functioned as a supplementary source of information to fill in potential gaps left by Represent Me.

I used Represent Me's spreadsheet as the primary tool when compiling the list of titles based on the year they were released, developers, publishers, and even more specific modifiers like the sexuality/gender of the player character. I reorganized the spreadsheet to focus primarily on the year the titled released, and its developer/publisher to get a better picture of how many games released in this period were made by independent teams versus mainstream companies. Once reorganized, I manually counted each title released between 2013 and 2017 to determine the total number of releases. I then categorized each title as either "Indie" or "AAA" and manually counted the titles in each group.

After painstakingly surveying every title listed on Represent Me released between 2013 and 2017, a total of 802 games were accounted for that feature queer content (Represent Me). I have split this count into two different sections: one that counts the number of games that have an indie developer (the creator), and one that counts games with indie publishers (the producers).

Out of the 802 titles listed, 745, or 93%, have developers who are classified as “Non-AAA” or “Indie”. This means that these games were made by a small or singular person development team. The remaining fifty-seven titles, or 7%, have developers classified as “AAA” or “Mainstream”. These games are considered AAA because they are all developed by large companies, such as Bethesda, EA, or CD Projekt Red. To complement this, I accounted for publisher by title to see how many games are backed by AAA publishers. Out of the 802 titles documented, 721 games, or roughly 90%, of the titles have a publisher classified as “Non-AAA” or “Indie”. These publishers are considered indie due to their overall size and the kinds of titles they publish. As well, many of the independent games are self-published, meaning that the developers also publish their games themselves rather than going through an external publishing company. This is mainly to ensure complete creative and legal control over their Intellectual Properties, or IPs. Eighty-one titles in the sample, or roughly 10%, were games with publishers classified as “AAA” or “Mainstream”. These publishers are considered mainstream due to the scale of games they publish, as well as their overall size and profit margin, as they can be worth millions, or even billions, of dollars.

This categorization built on the databases shows an enormous dichotomy between the number of independent games with queer content and mainstream games that offer the same. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that an overwhelming number of indie games released in this period offer some form of LGBTQ+ content as opposed to mainstream video games. This shows that the queer game’s avant-garde, as described by Ruberg, can be credited to both the rise of the independent gaming scene and the growing number of queer indie developers. On the other hand, this also shows that the mainstream industry is sorely lacking regarding games with

queer content. Based on the data, mainstream games only make up roughly 1/10th of the sample size.

Proportion of LGBTQ+ Games in Each Sector, Indie and Mainstream

While the data may seem overwhelmingly in favour of the independent industry, I must acknowledge the sheer volume of indie sector productions is far larger than the mainstream's output. I therefore estimate the proportion of LGBTQ+ games produced within each sector of the video game industry, indie and mainstream. This task proved incredibly challenging due to the difficulty of finding reliable sources reporting the total annual indie and mainstream output. I found no official lists, press releases, or charts showing the exact number of game releases during this period. IMDb lists total video games released annually between 2013-2016, but not for 2017. Wikipedia on the other hand, lists games released for each year, although there are clear discrepancies in the numbers these two websites report. For a rough guesstimate I used Wikipedia because, however inaccurate, it consistently reports releases for each year. After sorting the releases into indie and mainstream groups, I found 33.6 percent of indie productions and 4.2 percent of mainstream video games have LGBTQ+ content and themes for the years 2013 to 2017. For further details, see Appendix A.

While independent developers released a much larger number of games, a total of 2,211 between 2013-2017, only 745 or 33.6% of the total number of indie games include LGBTQ+ content (Wikipedia). On the other hand, the mainstream industry released far fewer games, a total of 1,355 between 2013-2017, with only fifty-seven, or 4.2% of mainstream releases featuring queer content in the same period (Wikipedia). The proportion of LGBTQ+ content the indies produced is far larger than mainstream productions. I reiterate, however, that this is an

approximation, but its value is in gaining a sense of the proportionate contribution to LGBTQ+ content from indie and mainstream sectors of the game industry.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Overview

I now turn to the qualitative content analysis of two select video games, a mainstream AAA game and an independent game, respectively. The mainstream example of a video game I chose is Bethesda's *Fallout 4* (2015), which I will compare with *Curtain* (2014). I chose *Fallout 4* (2015) for a few reasons. First, it is a massively popular mainstream release, which won numerous awards, falling within the period I am examining and it has queer content. Second, the *Fallout* (1997-present) series has a long lineage in the gaming industry, dating all the way back to 1997 with the original *Fallout* for PC. As previous entries also incorporated queer content, this title has a reputation to uphold. Third, the game incorporates that content very differently and Bethesda was openly criticized for the way they both incorporate LGBTQ+ content and represent LGBTQ+ persons and relationships. Lastly, while it may contain several instances of LGBTQ+ content, much of this content is either optional or reinforces a heteronormative narrative. Thus, analyzing this game provides the opportunity to compare it with an independent game that centres around its queer content and themes.

The independent example I chose is Llaura McGee's *Curtain* (2014), a queer driven narrative game. It is a first person, dialogue centered adventure game where the player experiences a same-sex relationship between the two main characters Kaci and Ally. The focus of the narrative is the emotional abuse within their queer relationship and how both the abuser and victim cope with this. This game was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it is an

independently made game where the main narrative focuses on a queer relationship. Secondly, the developer in question, Llaura McGee, is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. She is a queer transgender woman, which gives the game a uniquely queer perspective. Thirdly, the game tackles extremely sensitive topics such as abuse in queer relationships, which are hard to come by outside the independent scene. Lastly, I have never seen a game discuss and expose issues of queer abuse like this before. Coupled with McGee's personal experiences of abuse influencing the game's narrative, *Curtain* (2014) acts as a transgressive piece of video game media, one that is willing to take risks to bring these injustices to light.

Using content analysis, I will examine each game's queer content, such as story moments, dialogue, or characters. I closely analyze the different ways that each game introduces queer elements. I will compare the two games to assess which game has more meaningful queer content, infer which sector of the gaming industry handles queer content in games better, and had greater impact on its sharp increase from 2013 to 2017.

***Fallout 4* (2015)**

Fallout 4 (2015) is a first-person shooter/RPG developed by Bethesda Game Studios. It is the fourth main installment of the long running and critically acclaimed *Fallout* series and was generally well received by critics and players upon release. The game has a small measure of queer content, including same-gender relationship options, a small number of queer characters, and supplementary in-game materials such as holotapes (Represent Me). Despite the inclusion of this content, *Fallout 4* (2015) received significant backlash from players, both within the LGBTQ+ community and otherwise, about the ways in which this content was implemented in the game. Many took issue with the sexual nature of the players' relationships in *Fallout 4*

(2015), the lack of same-gender relationships within the game world, and the heteronormativity of the main narrative, forcing the player into a heterosexual relationship regardless of player gender for story purposes. This combined with constrictive character creation tools, few openly queer characters, and questionable dialogue towards a transgender character made *Fallout 4* (2015) a well-received game with, at times, problematic queer content.

Fallout 4 (2015) has the player control an unnamed character who lives in the future, the year 2077. While enjoying time with their opposite-sex spouse and infant child, a representative of the Vault-Tec corporation stops by the player's home and admits the family to the local fallout shelter of Vault 111. Not too long after this encounter, a news broadcast warns the surrounding area of an imminent nuclear strike. The player flees to Vault 111 with their family only to be put into cryostasis by a group of unknown individuals. The player is then woken some years later and witnesses two strangers murder their spouse and steal their infant son before being put back into cryostasis, only to reawaken once more after their life support fails. The player is then tasked with venturing out into the Wasteland to find whoever took their son and exact revenge.

Character Creator: Freedom to Choose?

Each of these inclusions will be examined critically to determine the quality and significance of the queer content and how it compares to the alternative that is *Curtain* (2014). To begin, the character creator present in *Fallout 4* (2015) is considered a favourite among fans. *Fallout* games in years past have been openly criticized for having extremely limited customization options for the player character, and very little diversity in terms of body types, skin types, body details, etc. This changed in the fourth installment as the new character creator included more options for body types, skin details, race and so on (Represent Me). One large

omission, however, is the lack of detailed gender options. In *Fallout 4* (2015), players can choose to play as a male or a female with no options in-between. There are no options for non-binary gender classifications, nor are there any transgender options available (Represent Me). This is further reinforced by the restrictive nature of mixing and matching gender specific hairstyles and voices; there are no options to create a man with a womanly voice and hair and vice versa (Represent Me). There are also no options to change the gender of your partner as the player is forced into a heteronormative relationship for the main story, which I return to later (Represent Me). As much as the character creator in *Fallout 4* (2015) has improved over previous iterations, it fails to offer any options to make the player character queer, transgender, or non-binary, while also making a very disturbing and misleading suggestion that a queer couple would not be able to carry the main story, since the main relationship in the game is kept strictly heterosexual (Represent Me).

The Queer Cast (Or Lack Thereof) of *Fallout 4*

Fallout 4 (2015) also has a few queer coded characters in its cast. Cait is a cage fighter who lives in one of the many Combat Zones in the world and has the potential to become the player's ally. It is implied that Cait is a lesbian with affections for other female characters, as seen in dialogue where Cait suggests a threesome between her, the player character and Piper Wright when she is present: "You two have fun together, Piper. Too bad we can't make it a threesome" (Represent Me). There are other minor queer characters that can be found throughout the game world, including Mel, Magnolia and Andre Michaud. Mel is one of the few male queer coded characters found in the game, who flirts in dialogue scenes with the player character, but only if the player character is a man (Represent Me). Magnolia, on the other hand, will flirt with the player character regardless of their gender, making her a player-sexual character within the

game world (Represent Me). For clarification, the term “player-sexual” refers to a non-playable character in a game that is attracted to the player character regardless of their sexual preference, hence making them “player-sexual,” blurring their true sexual orientation. Michaud, introduced in the game’s third downloadable content (or DLC) pack, *Far Harbour*, is a sickly hunter who reminisces about his husband, John, who was killed by a wild mirelurk while out hunting (*Fallout Wiki*). The player learns more about these characters by approaching them and engaging in a spoken dialogue, where the player has multiple options for how to interact with the character and discuss various topics. Only when the player delves deeper into the dialogue trees and picks the proper dialogue options do these character’s personalities and sexual preferences become apparent.

While these characters seem to be in favour of *Fallout 4*’s (2015) attempt to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ persons, they are superficial representations of queer personalities and relationships. This can be attributed mainly to the fact that *Fallout 4* (2015), like many games of its type, designs queer content as supplementary or separate from the main story or questline. This, by design, means that many, if not all, of the queer implied characters present in the game can be completely missed and may never interact with the player character. On top of this invisible queer design philosophy, only one of the characters previously listed is openly queer, that being Andre Michaud, who discusses his marriage with another man. It is only implied that Cait is attracted to other women, as seen in the previous quote, as are Mel and Magnolia, the former only showing affections to the player character based on gender and the latter flirting regardless. Nothing in the game openly exposit these characters are queer, rather they are written to potentially be queer through very subtle and easy to miss context cues. This method of character writing is a flaw that many games suffer, as is the case with *Fallout 4* (2015). Not only

can the player entirely miss these characters, making their inclusion superficial, but their queerness is never clearly defined, relegating them to hollow figures rather than fleshed out queer identities.

One minor character in *Fallout 4* (2015), upon further analysis, can be seen as a misrepresentation and mistreatment of trans persons. In the game world, players can find KL-E-0 (or Kleo), a friendly Assaultron robot who acts as a merchant in the Goodneighbour area (*Fallout* Wiki). Kleo identifies as a woman despite being a robot, but through spoken dialogue, the player character can openly berate her for identifying as female. This can be seen as the player character verbally assaulting a character who potentially bears a trans identity and physical appearance (Represent Me). This suggests the developers of *Fallout 4* (2015) willingly programmed, wrote, and incorporated a transgender character into their game, all the while undermining their identity through deliberate dialogue options. The inclusion of KL-E-0 as a robot that identifies as female seems to indicate that she was meant to be the main transgender inclusion of *Fallout 4* (2014). However, by writing and coding dialogue into the game that blatantly ridicules that character for their gender identification, it comes across as inconsiderate and rather hateful towards trans people. The developers chose to put this dialogue into the game that was directed at this specific character, which to me seems deliberate. Even as an unwitting move, it exposes a deep-seated bias, plain insensitivity, toward gender fluid identities.

The “Coming Out” Holotape: So Close, Yet So Far

One instance of queer content found in *Fallout 4* (2015) stands out against the rest of the game’s attempts. Through an optional holotape (*Fallout*’s version of an audio log), the player

learns of a minor character in the world recounting their story of coming out to their family. The dialogue from the holotape reads as follows:

October 22, 2077. I finally told them tonight, and it was bad. Real bad. Dad was shouting, telling me I should be ashamed, that I had to get out of the house. Mom just cried, and somehow that hurt worse than anything else. She didn't say a word, not even when I packed my things. I can't go to John—he doesn't even know yet. Maybe he'll never know. If it weren't for the cabin I wouldn't have a place to sleep. Just need some time to think. Last time I was here, I was just a little girl playing clubhouse in this old cabin. Now I'm really scared. Will anything ever be right again? (Represent Me).

This audio log stands out against the rest of the game's LGBTQ+ based content for a few reasons. Firstly, the story is told directly from the character's personal perspective, making their sexual orientation more noticeable or prominent than others, whose identities are merely implied at best. Second, the story itself tackles topics such as familial rejection, abuse, and anxiety, making it inherently more powerful and thought provoking than the simple action of adding a gay character, or having dialogue options players can miss that could reveal the character's true sexual orientation. The independent maker's game, *Curtain* (2014), analyzed below, examines comparable topics.

However, while this may be more meaningful than other instances, this still falls short in the same manner that other queer content is treated in *Fallout 4* (2015). The holotape is completely optional, meaning that it is likely many players will miss it entirely, much like most of the queer cast. Because of this, neither the holotape, nor the character that it presents, has any great impact on or significance to the main storyline or even side quests. It is a one-off audio log

placed in the game's world for the player to find. The implications, while more clear than other content of this type, also leaves much to be desired. In the dialogue, the character in question mentions that they had not been to the cabin where they seek shelter since they were a little girl. This implies that the character is female and that she had come out as a lesbian to her parents. However, earlier in the dialogue, she mentions that she "can't go to John—he doesn't even know yet. Maybe he'll never know" (Represent Me). It is never stated who John is, but his gender is explicitly told. Therefore, it can be inferred that John is not the lover of the character, as the dialogue signals she has come out as a lesbian. However, this becomes muddled with the possibility that the character is transgender, not homosexual. If the character is indeed transgender, this would make more sense, as they could identify as a transgender woman who is dating John and came out to her parents about transitioning. Not only is the implication here not clear, but it also makes it unnecessarily complicated and uncertain. This takes what seems like a thoughtful inclusion of queer issues on the surface and twists it into a convoluted, muddled mess of ambiguity. Bethesda should have been much more careful with the way they wrote this sequence so that it was entirely clear to the player what the character's identity is, showing further evidence to the developer's failure to handle queer content with care and respect.

Living in a Heteronormative World

All these ill-conceived attempts at including LGBTQ+ content in *Fallout 4* (2015) are trivial at best and offensive at worst, but possibly what is still worse is that in terms of queer content, the game forces players into a heteronormative relationship for the sake of the story. In *Fallout 4* (2015), players are given the ability to freely customize their character however they please, including race, gender, and various physical features. This freedom of characterization extends to the game world as well, as there are several characters the player can interact with and

romance regardless of gender. However, this semblance of freedom is suddenly contradicted when faced with the reality that the main narrative of the game forces a heteronormative relationship upon the player, one that states you must be married to an other-gender partner no matter what character you choose and what gender you pick in the character creator (Cole, 2016).

This, as Alayna Cole states in her article, *His Apocalypse: Normativity in Fallout 4* (2016), creates a jarring disconnect between the game and its narrative design. The game world is designed to give the player freedom in how they interact with it, including who they interact with and romance. This is then contradicted by the fact that the narrative dictates the player character must begin the game in a heteronormative relationship (Cole, 2016). This is not easy to escape from either, as the player is constantly reminded of the wife (or husband, if female) they were forced to have at the beginning of the game through dialogue, as well as the main goal of finding your son (Cole, 2016). This is further exemplified by *Fallout 4's* (2015) cinematic opening: a narration by a white man in a heteronormative relationship with his wife and son (Cole, 2016). Despite the potential for the player to escape this, they are reminded of it at the end of the game with the same white heteronormative male narration, the monologue about the decisions the main narrative conjures. This means that in *Fallout 4* (2015), no matter how hard players try to change it, it will forever be about a straight white man with a wife and son (Cole, 2016).

This decision is made even more baffling when taking into account prior entries in the series. Several of the past *Fallout* games did not force the player into these heteronormative circumstances from the beginning of the game, allowing much more freedom for the player to craft their own character. In *Fallout 3* (2008), the player controls a child in Vault 101 who

ventures into the Wasteland to find their missing father, with no pre-established relationships tied to their character. In *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), the player controls a courier who is shot and left for dead in the Wasteland; the victim is single at the time of the attack. Thus, in previous versions, the player's marital or relationship status was open at the beginning of the game to give them greater freedom over who they wish to romance and what orientation they wish to be. In *Fallout 4* (2015), by opting to lock the player into a heterosexual marriage from the start, the team at Bethesda have taken a step backward from their prior releases. No longer is the player given a clean slate to create the person they want to be; instead, Bethesda has told them who they should be, a message that is in stark contrast to older *Fallout* (1997-present) titles.

Fallout 4 (2015) is a game that tries very hard to offer meaningful content for its LGBTQ+ players, yet it fumbles every step of the way. It offers players freedom to customize their character any way they want, but forcibly limits how the player character expresses themselves sexually with a strict heteronormative narrative, something prior titles did not do. It offers numerous characters with an implied LGBTQ+ affiliation for the player to romance, but queer romancing in *Fallout 4* (2015) is underwhelming because many characters' true sexuality is left ambiguous due to being attracted to the player regardless of gender. It offers a confusing audio log that does a poor job conveying to the player what sexuality or even gender the character depicted is, and ultimately, all this content is optional. The player never has to interact with any of this at any point during the game. None of it is ever given attention as part of the main narrative and that same narrative insists on keeping the main relationship purely heterosexual. *Fallout 4* (2015) is a prime example of a game that has vast potential when it comes to its LGBTQ+ content, but never offers more than the bare minimum.

***Curtain* (2014)**

Curtain (2014) is an independent first-person adventure game developed by queer game maker Llaura McGee, under the development studio Dreamfeel. Released in 2014, *Curtain* went on to be acclaimed in the queer indie scene, winning several awards such as the Grand Prize for The Most Amazing Game at the A MAZE Berlin International Games Festival in 2015 and the award for Best Game Script from the Writers Guild of Ireland (McGee, 2014). *Curtain* (2014) was McGee's breakthrough title, allowing her to expand her studio to a small team of independent queer developers who went on to develop *If Found...* (2020), a sci-fi adventure game dealing with transgender issues. The LGBTQ+ content found in *Curtain* (2014) is fairly straightforward; unlike *Fallout 4* (2015), which offers optional queer content that the player could miss entirely, queerness and the hidden struggles of LGBTQ+ persons is at the heart of the game's narrative.

The game follows two queer women, Ally and Kaci, who are in a romantic relationship and a punk band in Glasgow, Scotland. Players take control of Ally as she wanders the couple's apartment, inspects various objects that remind her of her past, all the while Kaci, her abusive queer partner, offers comments on the player's actions. The game is played from a first-person perspective as the player will explore Ally and Kaci's apartment, interacting with Kaci, the environment, and key physical objects as the game's story progresses. The game builds on the difficult subject of abuse to draw attention to problems faced by LGBTQ+ persons every day. In this analysis, I will examine the numerous ways the game achieves this, including its narrative, abstract visuals, Kaci's dialogue, and comments from Llaura McGee herself on the inspiration for the game.

A Queer Narrative

From the start, *Curtain* (2014) incorporates its LGBTQ+ content in a more nuanced way than its AAA counterparts and makes it the central focus of the game. In several other games, LGBTQ+ content is relegated to optional character interactions or romance storylines. Some games let the player customize their character, including their gender and sexuality, but rarely does that ever translate to anything more than an additional feature. In *Curtain* (2014), the narrative is inherently queer, as the player controls a lesbian going through a difficult relationship with a lesbian partner. The game does not decide to make any of this optional; instead, the player is put right into the perspective of a queer person experiencing queer issues. This design choice means that this is explicitly a queer game not only narratively, but thematically and in its world of characters.

This is further exemplified in the way the game tackles its subject matter. The themes of *Curtain* (2014) involve abuse in queer relationships and the anxiety and trauma that stems from it. With this somber subject structuring the game's narrative, *Curtain* (2014) is not afraid to show players the darker side of the LGBTQ+ community. In a study on lesbian partner violence for the University of Missouri, Dr. Suzana Rose shows that around 17% of lesbians have reported being victim of at least one count of physical violence by their lesbian partners (2000). It should be stated that *Curtain* (2014) does not show any explicit acts of physical abuse. The game focuses more on the psychological abuse that Kaci inflicts on Ally. However, verbal and mental abuse is just as much of a problem in queer relationships as physical and just as destructive according to the report *Abuse in Same-Sex and LGBTQ Relationships* (2006). Further breakdown of Dr. Rose's statistics shows that among the sample size of this study, psychological abuse was reported to have occurred at least once to roughly 24% of the participants (Rose, 2000). Some

emotional abuse tactics present in queer relationships include insulting, blaming, or lying to the other partner, controlling their freedom, ridiculing the other's personal or spiritual beliefs, controlling the other's finances, and intimidation (*Abuse in Same-Sex and LGBTQ Relationships*, 2006).

Abuse among queer couples is just as persistent as it is with heterosexual ones, and this is something that *Curtain* (2014) shows firsthand to the player. Throughout the game, several of the mental abuse tactics described by the above-mentioned studies are depicted, including Kaci ridiculing, manipulating, and controlling Ally. Through its narrative and subject matter, *Curtain* (2014) not only stands as an important title in LGBTQ+ game making, but it stands as an important piece of media awareness. The game goes out of its way to have the player experience the dark and frightening world of queer abuse directly. It wishes to bring attention to issues that plague LGBTQ+ persons every day, and in doing so, provides an extremely nuanced, creative, and thought-provoking inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in games, one that puts queer content front and center while bringing attention to the real world of uncomfortable queer issues generally shrouded in silence.

Visualizing Abuse Through Unique Aesthetics

The narrative and thematic core is not the only thing in *Curtain* (2014) that makes it such an important queer game. It is inherently about queer abuse, and it utilizes every aspect of video games to bring attention to it. One of the most striking ways the game accomplishes this is through its visual style. Video games are heavily visual, and each game has a unique art style that reflects the game's genre or themes. In *Curtain* (2014), the art style is specifically used to further enhance its themes of queer abuse and anxiety. The game's colour palette is soaked in

neon hues; lavish pinks, deep purples and somber blues coat the walls of Ally and Kaci's apartment. These colder colours are complemented with bright, contrasting reds and yellows of various windows, objects, and corridors. Every colour of the rainbow is represented in the game's colour design, which serves a double purpose. It subtly implies the queer nature of the game, as the rainbow colour scheme is used to symbolize the LGBTQ+ community, but it also acts as a visual metaphor of Ally's deteriorating mental state. The abundance of colours shows that Ally's grip on reality is slipping because of her constant abuse; she cannot focus on anything, she disassociates, and thus all she sees is a blurring of all her emotions and fears.

The colour design is not the only thing about the art style of *Curtain* (2014) that circles back to its queer themes. The game renders its graphics in a retro pixel style akin to classic PC games of the early 1990s. This decision serves a deeper thematic purpose, as the visuals will change depending on situations in the game. During regular gameplay, the level of pixelization is rather low, giving a more relaxed feel as the player explores Ally's apartment and interacts with key objects. This symbolizes the calm side of *Curtain's* (2014) story, where Ally reminisces on things from her past or people she has met. When Kaci is involved, however, *Curtain* (2014) makes a brilliant decision. During intense moments between Ally and Kaci, the game chooses to increase the magnitude of pixels to symbolize the anxiety and fear that Kaci's abuse puts on Ally. One example of this is when Ally tells Kaci she wants to quit the band. As Kaci frantically tries to talk her out of it, the screen swells up with pixels and visual noise. As Ally walks away and Kaci's voice wanders off, however, the screen returns to normal, showing that Kaci's presence and abusive behaviour has a deep psychological effect on Ally's mental state.

Another example of this is when Ally hides in the bathroom to avoid Kaci. Kaci comes pounding on the door demanding that Ally come out and face her. During this sequence, the

screen blurs into a sea of pixels as Kaci continues to berate Ally for avoiding her and not answering her directly. Ally, overwhelmed by stress, fear and panic, sits silently in the bathroom, the pixels clouding her vision being the perfect visual indicator of her trauma. *Curtain* (2014) uses its art style and visual design in clever and intelligent ways. It serves to code the game as queer through its use of colour and visually communicates the abuse experienced by Ally to the player. Through the use of video game graphics, *Curtain* (2014) communicates its themes and messages visually to the player, and shows that queer abuse is real, abundant, and just as insidious as any other kind.

Verbal As Much as Physical

Much like the visuals are tailored to employ the themes of queer abuse, so is the dialogue written for Kaci, the abuser character. Kaci acts as the one abusing Ally in this lesbian relationship and her dialogue is carefully crafted by McGee to make that abundantly clear. Several lines of dialogue throughout the game show how ruthless, manipulative and outright cruel Kaci is towards Ally, further displaying the issues with abuse in queer relationships. I will closely examine lines from her dialogue in the game. At one point in the game, Rebecca, a friend of Ally's, expresses concern about Kaci's behaviour towards Ally. Once they are alone, Kaci says to Ally, "I really don't want you hanging out with Rebecca anymore. I think she wants to break us apart, I don't like her" (*Curtain*, 2014). This shows that Kaci obsessively controls every aspect of Ally's life, down to the people she hangs out with. Seeing Rebecca as a threat, Kaci tells Ally that she wants her to cut ties with Rebecca, never taking into consideration how Ally feels.

Near the start of the game, Kaci welcomes Ally into the apartment in an overly sweet and sensual manner, calling her “cute,” telling Ally that she is “so hot,” following up with “Especially when you pout. Hey! Hey! Let me kiss you, you know you like it” (*Curtain*, 2014). To a normal player, this may seem like standard dialogue, showing how much Kaci is attracted to Ally. However, not long after, Kaci shows her true colours by insulting Ally’s art pieces, rudely calling her a “lazy lump” and isolating Ally from those around her (Riendeau, 2014). Given the behaviour and dialogue that precedes the previously mentioned scene, it becomes clear that Kaci uses sweet and loving words at the start to manipulate Ally, to lure her into a false sense of security, and once her guard is down, then Kaci does whatever she wants. The game purposely misleads the player into thinking the same thing Ally does only for the true nature of Kaci to be revealed.

Later in the game, Ally tells Kaci that she is thinking of quitting their band. Enraged, Kaci replies with the following:

What?? QUIT? You want to quit? Are you joking? You can’t quit. I don’t even know what to say, how to put it into words. Everything rests on you. I rest on you. What will you do? You don’t know what you’re saying, cut the crap. (*Curtain*, 2014)

Kaci’s reaction to Ally quitting is a terrifying reminder of how abusers use words to control their victims. She pleads with Ally to stay both to keep the band, and thus her livelihood, alive, and to assert her control over Ally. If Ally quits, then Kaci’s power over her disappears. She also guilt-trips Ally into staying by claiming that “Everything rests on you. I rest on you” (*Curtain*, 2014). She uses her relationship with Ally as leverage, claiming that she needs Ally so much, when in reality, she will go right back to her abusive ways. She also gaslights Ally by saying that “You

don't know what you're saying, cut the crap" (*Curtain*, 2014). In abusive relationships, gaslighting is a very common tactic used by abusers, as it forces the abused to second guess their own thoughts and feelings. By telling Ally that she does not know what she is saying, Kaci is deliberately gaslighting her to force Ally into agreeing with her and to second guess if she really wants out.

One other important instance of dialogue occurs when Ally hides from Kaci in the bathroom. As Kaci stands at the door, she says:

Hey, are you in there? Where have you been? I've been ringing all evening. You get back, and you just get into the shower? Hey, answer me! I know you're in there. You've not been the same for months now, what's the big deal? (*Curtain*, 2014)

This dialogue shows the anger that Kaci inflicts on Ally. She viciously demands that Ally answer her and come out. She questions Ally's motives for avoiding her. She inquires about where Ally has been, as if she does not trust her to be by herself. She claims that she knows Ally is in there, menacingly letting her know that there is nowhere she can hide from her. She states that Ally has not been the same for months but does not know why, perhaps ignorant to, or even disregarding, her own actions and the toll that it has taken on Ally. This dialogue shows Kaci personifies textbook abuser traits.

This dialogue in particular shows how *Curtain* (2014) portrays abuse in queer relationships. Often, queer partners will use manipulation, forcefulness, control, or seduction to hold power over their significant other. In the game, Kaci utilizes all these to assert her power over Ally. She wishes to control Ally's life, she uses seduction to make her vulnerable, she presents visible rage when Ally does not conform to her desires, she gaslights her to make her second guess her

feelings, and she manipulates situations to force Ally to stay despite her better judgements. *Curtain* (2014) is a cautionary tale of how abuse can fester in queer relationships, and the dialogue written for the abuser character expertly drives this point home.

When Art Imitates Life

What makes *Curtain*'s (2014) queer content and themes more resonant is that they were directly influenced by events from Laura "Dreamfeel" McGee's personal life. In an interview with Polygon, McGee goes into details of the writing process and what helped shape the narrative of the final game. McGee states that at first, it was not based around her own experiences, but rather those of some close friends: "Initially it was some people close to me who I had seen come through similar relationships." (Riendeau, 2014) As development progressed, however, McGee realized that more and more of her own firsthand experiences were making their way into the game, and ultimately, developing *Curtain* (2014) was a means of therapy:

Then as I wrote the story, more of my own experience started to seep in through the cracks. [...] I went through a really intense, personal experience not too long ago that consumed my entire life and from which I couldn't recognize myself or see anything beyond it. It surprised me how raw a lot of it still was. Making *Curtain* helped me process a lot of that. (Riendeau, 2014).

Later in the interview, McGee discusses how she conceived the concept of *Curtain* (2014) not only from her own life, but from the notion that many are unaware of the abuse happening in LGBTQ+ relationships and that abuse can affect victims long after they are freed from it:

That's maybe one of the biggest issues, and unfortunately it only becomes clearer in retrospect. What I really wanted to get across [...] was the lasting imprint [abuse] can have. That you can have moved on in every sense, but even if they've faded, the scars are still there at some level, or more to the point [there is the] potential for habits, thoughts or feelings to resurface. (Riendeau, 2014)

Curtain (2014) is perhaps most powerful as a piece of cautionary media because of the personal side McGee incorporated in the game. As a gay trans woman, McGee communicates to the audience that situations like those in *Curtain* (2014) are real and happen every day. They are ugly, they are violent, and they are uncomfortable but if we are not aware of their existence and how they happen, then we can never stop the constant cycle of abuse. The game feels authentic in that sense, like you are witnessing McGee's real-world experiences first-hand. McGee is at the heart of what makes *Curtain* (2014) a stand-out queer indie title, as she has woven her personality, trauma, and wisdom on queer abuse into this game, making it an authentic, thought-provoking experience of abuse suffered by many queer people every single day.

***Curtain's* Social Significance**

Curtain (2014) stands out as an icon of queer indie game-making, moving beyond a superficial celebration of LGBTQ+ identity, ending the secrecy surrounding domestic violence within the LGBTQ+ community, and potentially reaching out to isolated victims. The thing that stands out for me the most is McGee's dedication to using *Curtain* (2014) as a means of education. Above all else, the main message of the game is to communicate the horrific realities of queer abuse in everyday life. Because of this, McGee has taken a stand to break the silence on a taboo subject – the bullying, objectification, and discrimination of not only queer persons

within the public sphere, but in their own private lives. Abuse is a daily occurrence around the world for many people and by making this the focus of her video game, McGee uses *Curtain* (2014) to reach out to those who feel trapped by domestic abuse, those who suffer the same kind of hardships presented in the game, and it educates those unfamiliar with the subject.

Curtain (2014) is an excellent example of how to do queer content in games right. The experience is queer at its core, with the main narrative, characters and themes being queer. None of this content is optional nor can it be missed by the player, making for a hundred percent queer driven game. The game utilizes its narrative and themes to bring attention to abuse in queer relationships, something that affects countless queer people on a regular basis. It further exemplifies this theme through its claustrophobic visuals that become more intense and indelible when the abuser character, Kaci, attacks the player. This shows through visuals the mental affects that abuse can have on victims in relationships of this kind, making the art style of *Curtain* (2014) a deliberate vehicle to communicate this message to the player. The game also has several instances of dialogue for Kaci that draw on the themes of queer abuse, showing how Kaci uses every abuse tactic associated with abusers. This is all brought together by McGee's subjective experiences with queer abuse and ridicule that permeate every aspect of the game, creating an authentic experience of what queer abuse looks like. To top it off, the game is made by a single queer trans woman. This shows that independent developers with knowledge and personal attachment to the LGBTQ+ community have immense potential to create games that highlight queer themes, issues, and lifestyle that reaches wider audiences. *Curtain* (2014) is a testament to how independent developers can create engaging and important queer content in games with only a fraction of the budget and manpower as their AAA competitors.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined the dramatic increase in LGBTQ+ game content from 2013 to 2017. Video games have come a long way since their introduction as a media form in the 1970s. Once primitive and simplistic, they are now vehicles for some truly revolutionary stories affecting marginalized communities. LGBTQ+ content was once underutilized and misunderstood, but now there are countless games from across the industry that have explored LGBTQ+ themes, which resonate with players. Most notably, LGBTQ+ content in games hit a peak between 2013 and 2017 (see Figure 1 below), where every year, more games were releasing that had some form of queer content. I have critically analyzed this period to determine what drove this eruption of queer content in games, and I can say without doubt that one of the driving factors is the independent gaming industry.

Analysis Summary

I began with examining queer game literature by queer scholars. It provides a clear picture of the increase in LGBTQ+ game content from 2013-2015. I examined the Represent Me and LGBTQ Video Game Archive databases and did indeed find that between 2013 and 2015, and even beyond that until 2017, the role of independent developers, mainly queer developers, forged a queer games Renaissance, bursting with creative, thought provoking and innovative games that challenged the industry's conventions of representing sexual identity. Moreover, the way LGBTQ+ content has been incorporated in mainstream AAA games pales in comparison, offering a much less nuanced and detailed depiction of LGBTQ+ themes and struggles. Undoubtedly, queer indie developers are the main contributors for the substantial queer game content increase. I compared two video games, *Fallout 4* (2015) of the mainstream industry, a

game with an abundance of shallow, surface level queer content and compared that to *Curtain* (2014), which I chose because it is exemplary of independent developers and their enormous contribution to LGBTQ+ representation. The former is muted, an almost token inclusion of LGBTQ+ content, available for an acknowledged niche market segment interested in searching for this content.

Choosing content analysis as my method in this study allowed me to analyze how queer content has been incorporated in video games in a meaningful or provocative way. I compiled video game title lists extracted from queer game databases, and this revealed 802 games with queer content were released between 2013 and 2017. An overwhelming number, 745 or 93%, of these were developed or published by smaller independent teams rather than big name companies (Represent Me). Independent game makers must be credited for the exponential rise in games with queer content during this period, and those 745 games constitute roughly 33.6% of the total number of an approximate 2,211 indie games released during this period (Wikipedia), which is quite high.

In my approach to qualitative content analysis, I chose to analyze two games, one from the mainstream gaming industry and one from the independent gaming industry, to see how each sector handles queer content. *Fallout 4* (2014) offers much in the form of LGBTQ+ content but fails to make any of it relevant or impactful. While it attempts to offer queer relationships, characters, and stories, ultimately none of this content is necessarily experienced by players. It is all strictly optional and never mandatory to move the game forward. This means the player can miss all this content, making its application of the inclusivity principle questionable. *Curtain* (2014), on the other hand, offers queer content that is crucial to the game's identity and narrative. Its story, characters, writing, visuals, and inspiration are all inherently queer, making the game

an authentic examination of toxic queer relationships and the effects that abuse can have on queer persons.

Based on my analysis, it is clear that *Fallout 4* (2014) offers queer content but hides it all away from the player. The game is obsessed with keeping a heterosexual status quo despite having multiple queer characters and artifacts in the world that involve queer issues. This content feels like an afterthought, a blatant attempt to claim their game is more inclusive when in reality, none of this content has any impact on playing the game. *Curtain* (2014) by comparison is the superior game regarding inclusion of LGBTQ+ content. It incorporates content in a meaningful way that is both intuitive, creative, and thought-provoking, touching on sensitive subjects and issues relevant to the queer community. This coupled with my examination of the queer games database shows that independent developers have more potential and ability to create inspiring queer content in games, which could have led to this general increase. However, my study is not perfect and there are some concerns and limitations with this subject and the methods I chose.

Concerns & Limitations

There is the issue of the limitations of the content analysis method and how those limitations could impact this research. In an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of content analysis, Klaus Krippendorff (1989) states that one limitation of the method stems from a commitment to the scientific community, as “Statistically significant findings require many units of analysis, and seeking such findings amounts to a commitment to be quantitative” (p. 407). Furthermore, Alan Bryman (2009) mentions that “content analysis can only be as good as the documents with which the practitioner works” (p. 310). This limitation means that if the materials to be examined in this study, that is, queer content in independent games and

comparing it to a more mainstream effort, turn out to be insufficient or of inadequate quality, then the content analysis of the mechanics will ultimately end up lackluster, which could negatively affect the study.

Multiple people with a variety of perspectives examining the project will determine whether my close reading and qualitative analysis is widely accepted. Arguably the biggest limitation of content analysis as stated by Bryman (2009) is “when the aim is to impute latent meanings [...] For example, in searching for traditional markers of masculinity and femininity, the potential for invalid conjecture is magnified” (p. 310). This means that conclusions can be made based on incomplete or biased information. Biases, prejudices, and misinformed ideas all have the potential to impact the outcome of a research study, especially when the subject of the study is a vulnerable group of people with unique life experiences and place in society. I cannot vouch for all queer persons of the world. My own experiences and perceptions of this content and its execution does not reflect the feelings of LGBTQ+ persons who may connect with or be offended by this same content. LGBTQ+ community members who examine this material in the future could potentially reinforce my findings. However, in this study, I have also gathered data, raw facts, and those facts seems to point towards independent game developers having a much greater role in the explosion of queer content in games than mainstream developers.

I stated in the introduction that other media, like television and film, began introducing queer elements to the mainstream much sooner than video games. This seemingly late arrival of an abundance of queer content in video games could be a site for future research. In the queer games databases, I counted 802 games with queer content were released between 2013-2017. I have only critically examined two titles from this group, a mere sliver of the overall sample. Conducting qualitative analysis of more titles in this sample will be worth undertaking to

determine if the idea of indie games offering stronger queer content than mainstream games hold true. Mainstream games with queer content are fifty-seven in number, 4.2% of an approximate 1,355 mainstream games released during this period (Wikipedia). The proportion of queer indie and mainstream games in each sector are a rough estimation at best, based on a source that can be considered inaccurate in academic research. Further studies with more accurate data sets will be more conclusive.

This paper focuses primarily on the period between 2013-2017, as this shows the most substantial increase; however, from 2018 onward there is a noticeable decline in the number of games featuring queer content. Figure 1 below shows the number of games with queer content peaks in 2016 with a total of 249 games, followed closely in 2017 with 243 (Represent Me). After that there is a further decline in 2018, right before the numbers plummet in 2019, with only seventy-eight games released featuring queer content (Represent Me). This decline is rather surprising and worth investigating in future research.

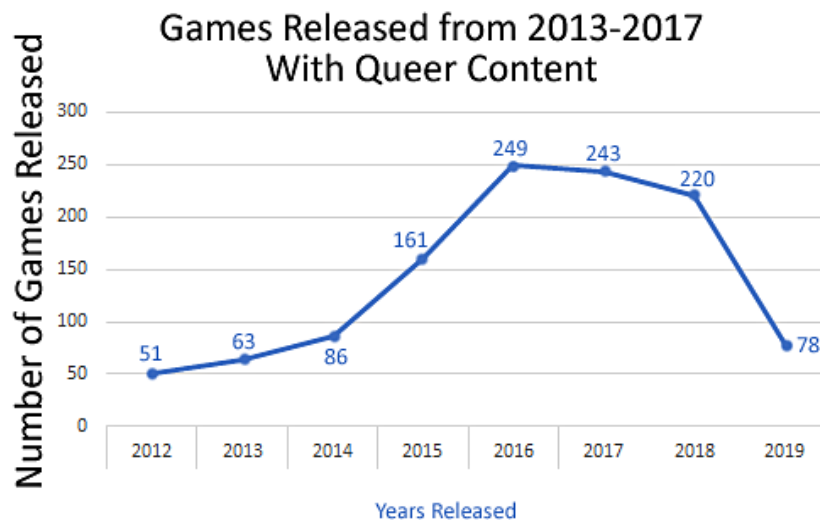


Figure 1: Line graph showing the number of games featuring queer content released from 2012 to 2019. A subtle decrease in the number of games begins to form in 2018, while a sudden decline takes place in 2019.

Ultimately, this paper's purpose is to examine the phenomenon of a spike in LGBTQ+ content in video games and find the probable cause. Through all the research and findings, it is safe to assume that one reason for this exponential increase in LGBTQ+ content in video games from 2013-2017 can be attributed to the independent gaming industry. Indie developers are producing countless games that are revolutionizing not only the way we play games, but the way we view them as well. Queer indie games are a catalyst for hot button issues that many queer people are facing, including abuse, ridicule, mistreatment, hate crimes and lack of general respect as human beings. *Fallout 4* (2015) is a disappointment regarding its queer content, having a desire to include meaningful queer content but never going that extra mile to do so. By comparison, there are many games out there like *Curtain* (2014) that break the silence on taboo subjects and bring attention to topics both within the LGBTQ+ community and for a wider audience. It shows the sheer creative potential that indie games have when creating queer game content, and that is the difference between these two industry sectors. The indies are willing to take risks and make games that are queer at their core, while many mainstream developers only wish to include miniscule amounts to claim they seek inclusion. In the end, if the indies continue to produce queer content of this quality and magnitude, they can be the leaders in the queer game's revolution, allowing for more developers, mainstream or otherwise, to keep making queer content better. This singular phenomenon can become the new standard for queer game content.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Counts for Total Amount of Video Games Released 2013-2017, Indie and Mainstream:

The following table details the approximate number of total mainstream and indie games released per year between 2013-2017.

Year	Total # of Mainstream Games	Total # of Indie Games
2013	325	428
2014	306	496
2015	274	408
2016	227	523
2017	223	356

The total approximate number of mainstream games released between 2013 and 2017 is 1,355, while the total approximate number of indie games released during this same time sits at 2,211 (Wikipedia). The total number of mainstream games featuring queer content released in this period is fifty-seven, while the total number of indie games with queer content during the same time sits at 745 (Represent Me). Therefore, 4.2% of the total number of mainstream games released between 2013-2017 feature queer content. 33.6% of the total number of indie games released between 2013-2017 feature queer content.

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